



Health Facts

STRESS MANAGEMENT



Introduction

Stress affects all of us! Every day we experience stress. Nearly 85 percent of visits to doctors are for stress-related problems. Have you learned to overreact with too much distress and tension many times each day? This response may turn into a headache, stomach problems, insomnia, aches and pains, fatigue, high blood pressure, or any other stress-related disorder?

Have you learned to be Stressed Out?

Learning to be too tense and stressed early in life causes immediate and long term stress problems. Through childhood experiences you were led to believe that to succeed you needed to put yourself in high gear or psych yourself up in order to perform well. Perhaps it was on your first test in the second or third grade. You got a little stressed or really nervous. Took the test, and passed it. During the next test you got psyched up and got a good grade, too. In high school and even college you got good at that pattern - when taking tests, giving a speech, doing all kinds of things.

You are probably convinced that high stress and performance go hand in hand, convinced that you need to psych yourself up to perform well. Most people believe this and it seems reasonable. After all, it worked in the past and you've never learned any other way. As a result, tension and stress are the motivators you know best. Remember that most of us react about 100 times each day with modest fight-or-flight responses. We usually have one biological system that reacts more strongly than the others. It's the system that eventually shows signs of wear and tear.

When a muscle is tensed, it takes 20 minutes for it to completely relax! When we're reacting many times a day, there isn't that recovery period that our bodies need. So the tension builds. Muscle reactors might hurt from tense shoulders and neck, tension headaches could begin as the day progresses, lower back problems might occur, or you could be overly tired at the day's end. Those tense muscles are like driving a car with the brakes on--it runs out of gas. And so our bodies conk out too!

What are some tips for reducing stress?

- Learn to accept what you cannot change
- Work on only one project at a time by setting priorities
- Get plenty of sleep!
- Work off tensions through physical activities and good exercise
- View change as positive, rather than as a threat
- Take regular breaks!

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Humor may be one of our best antidotes to stressful situations. By seeing the humor in a stressful situation, we may be able to change our response. Humor allows us to distance ourselves and replace paralyzing feelings of anxiety with mirth. When we laugh, we simply cannot be worrying deeply at the same time. Also, a robust laugh gives the muscles of your face, shoulders, diaphragm, and abdomen a good workout. Heart rate and blood pressure temporarily rise, breathing becomes faster and deeper, and oxygen surges throughout your bloodstream. A good laugh simply makes us feel so much better!

Here is an exercise, which can help you relax and also help you to become more aware of the difference between tense and relaxed muscles.

- Sitting comfortably in a chair with your eyes closed, clench your right fist tightly.
- Then relax it. Let your whole arm go limp. Feel the difference? Do it again.
- Then repeat with your left arm.
- Next, with your arms hanging relaxed at your sides, raise your eyebrows, crinkle your forehead and tense the muscles of your scalp. Relax, tense, and relax.
- Do the same with your eyes and nose, then your jaw and neck, your shoulders, your chest and stomach, the muscles of your buttocks, then your thighs, your calves, your ankles and your toes.
- When you finish with each part of your body it will be heavy, calm, totally relaxed.
- Sit quietly for a few minutes. Open your eyes.
- Enjoy the relaxed state!

How to Stay Upbeat and Positive?

- Expect positive outcomes every day!
- Start each day by planting positive seeds of thought!
- Look forward, not backward...
- Take time every day to daydream
- Dare to aim high
- Learn from your mistakes and move on
- Accept occasional small setbacks
- Live your dreams!

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Navy Knowledge Online (NKO) at <http://www.nko.navy.mil> or the
Navy Environmental Health Center (NEHC) at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp>.